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The Lesson of 'The Confession'

A Survivor of Slansky Trial Speaks Out On Soviet Terror

By EUGEN LOEBL

When my American friends saw the film, "The Confession," they asked only one question: Were the real prisoners of the Slansky trials treated as brutally as the characters are treated in this film? I was disturbed to learn that they were surprised by the brutality that exists in the Soviet bloc.

I answered their question by saying that the real torture and sufferings were far worse than those depicted in the film. Artur London, the author of "The Confession" and the film's hero, told me that although he had been in many capitalist and fascist prisons and had been tortured many times, he had never confessed. But a "socialist" prison broke his resistance.

London's personal tragedy is similar to the tragedy of thousands of revolutionaries who were forced to "confess" in Soviet, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Polish and Czechoslovak prisons. All of these confessions and trials bore the signature of Soviet intelligence interrogators who applied the methods used in the famous Moscow trials in the nineteen-thirties to the satellite countries after the war. This, in itself, indicates that torture and imprisonment are a fundamental part of the Soviet system.

I expected Americans to ask: why were innocent revolutionaries and devoted members of the Communist parties imprisoned, tortured and forced to confess to treason? And, why were the victims then rehabilitated by the same party and the very same system?

I will try to answer these questions from my own knowledge about the Slansky trials. I was the first of the defendants in the Slansky trials to be imprisoned (I was imprisoned in November, 1949, and London at the beginning of 1951).

After the Czechoslovak Communist party came to power in 1948, its leadership decided to bow to Soviet pressure and accepted the Soviet "offer" to "detect" Yugoslav and Anglo-American agents in its rank and file. It allowed the creation of a special Soviet security group which took control of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Interior. Within a few months every member of the Government and party leadership became dependent on these "advisers."

In this way Czechoslovakia fell under Soviet rule. Any political action that was not in line with Soviet policy was condemned as high treason. Thus in essence the trials were a condemnation of the policy of an independent road for Czechoslovak socialism.

Under Soviet pressure, the party leadership betrayed their own political program, then betrayed the independence of their country, and finally, threw overboard those who had carried out their orders. Although the Slansky trials had fourteen formal defendants, in truth, Czechoslovakia was on trial. After the trials, those in charge of the Communist party became the tools of the Soviets.

Stalin's one-man dictatorship of the Soviet Union created a situation where no one, even in the highest echelons of power, could be certain that he would not be purged. The book, "Khrushchev Remembers," explicitly describes the feeling of permanent danger that accompanied the purges. When Stalin died, the party leadership took steps to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of one man. Beria (head of the secret police and the most powerful man in Russia after Stalin's death) was murdered by the majority of the Politburo in order to forestall the rise of a new Stalin. To justify his murder and prove their "innocence," the new leadership declared that the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet system were, in fact, the crimes of Stalin, Beria, and their followers. Naturally at least some of the victims of their excesses had to be rehabilitated.

The reform that followed Stalin's death, "Khrushchevism," is widely misunderstood in the West as a liberalization of the Soviet system. In reality, Khrushchevism was little more than the distribution of power among the members of the Politburo so that it could not be turned against any of those in power. The activities of the State Security organs and their arbitrariness were also curtailed. But, these changes represented reform *within* the system, not a change of the system. The arbitrary rule of one man was replaced by the arbitrary rule of a handful of men. The restriction of the rights of the Soviet citizens and the crushing of the Hungarian revolt under Khrushchev were consistent with the worst aspects of Stalinism.

Stalin justified the purges with the philosophical claim that class struggle becomes more intensive after the realization of socialism. On Nov. 18, 1970, at a meeting in Prague, Mr. Starikov, secretary of the Soviet Embassy there, repeated Stalin's claim and stated that the last 14 years had proven that Stalin was right. Mr. Starikov said that he expects that the next Party Congress in Moscow will confirm this thesis.

This system still exists; the changes have been peripheral. The prospect of a humanistic regime in Czechoslovakia became a threat to the Soviet Union, and despite solemn promises to respect Czechoslovakia's sovereign rights, the Red Army led the invasion that occupied Czechoslovakia.

Despite its crimes and repressive activities the Soviet Union remains a highly respected world power, courted even by American politicians. Despite his rise to power at the height of the purges, Khrushchev is described as a man "good for his country and the world."

History teaches us that those who are not able to learn from the past will have to learn in the future. It also teaches us that as time goes on the price of these lessons is higher and higher.

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